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Detroit Free Press

Macomb County news briefs

APRIL 25, 2008

WARREN: Mom found guilty in son's death

A Warren woman was found guilty Thursday of first-degree murder in connection with the death of her 2-year-old son.

Crystal Conklin, 27, was convicted of murder and first-degree child abuse after a Macomb County Circuit Court jury deliberated for about two hours. Macomb County prosecutors charged that Conklin severely beat her son Sean Sowards, who was found in his own vomit June 11 at the family home on Jarvis Street. He died two days later at a local hospital.

Conklin will be given the mandatory sentence of life without parole May 21.

Investigators said the boy had a fractured femur, two missing toenails and bruises all over his body. Michael Sowards, the boy's father, also has been charged with child abuse in connection with his son's death. His case is separate.

In closing arguments Thursday, Macomb County Assistant Prosecutor Therese Tobin said Conklin treated her 4-year-old daughter, Angel, better than her son.

"Sean was the target of the defendant's torture," Tobin said.

Ronald Goldstein, Conklin's lawyer, said some of Sean's injuries were caused by Angel during horseplay.



Jury: Mom murdered son

Evidence 'overwhelming' that she abused, killed 2-year-old

By Jameson Cook
Macomb Daily Staff Writer

A 27-year-old Warren woman was found guilty of felony murder and first-degree child abuse Thursday in the death of her 2-year-old boy and will be ordered to spend the rest of her life in prison.

A Macomb County jury of eight men and four women convicted Crystal Conklin after deliberating slightly more than two hours. She is scheduled to be sentenced May 21 by Judge John Foster.

Conklin's son, Sean Sowards, died June 13 from a single blunt force trauma blow to the head. His death came two days after being taken to a hospital for being unresponsive and vomiting.

The jury foreman, Tony Markel of Warren, outside the courtroom described the evidence against Conklin as "overwhelming."

"We're strong in our verdict," he said.

Dozens of bruises, abrasions, cuts and a bite mark were found on the boy, whom a doctor said also was malnourished. Jurors saw photographs of those injuries, including a fracture, open wound on his forehead and missing toenails, replaced by what appeared to be dried blood.

"We saw a lot of pictures," Markel said. "I have kids. I can't see anybody doing that to a child. We did this for Sean."

Assistant Macomb prosecutor Therese Tobin during her closing arguments referred to the toe injuries as, "those God-awful toes, the pain he must have been in, the pain he must have complained about."

Markel implied Conklin lied on the witness stand.

"She changed her story around," he said. "She couldn't back up anything she said."

Meanwhile, Tobin "had a lot of evidence and backed everything up," he said.

Conklin's defense was mainly to blame Michael Sowards, the father of Sean and her live-in boyfriend, for the long-term abuse and fatal blow. She said she never reported the abuse of Sean to authorities because Sowards was abusive toward her and she feared he would retaliate.

Sowards arrived home from a day of work and going to his uncle's house in Chesterfield Township about 7 to 7:30 p.m. and found Sean unresponsive, according to multiple statements.

Conklin for the first time claimed at the trial Sowards had come home about 4:15 p.m. for about 15 minutes and left, when he could have hit Sean.

Tobin questioned Conklin's logic during her closing arguments. If Soward beat the boy at 4:15 p.m., Tobin wondered why Conklin failed to take an injured Sean to the hospital over the next three hours.

When Sowards arrived later, "Why did Michael immediately scoop him up and take him to the hospital?" Tobin said.

"She tried to concoct a story of abuse" by Sowards, Tobin said.

Conklin said some of the bruises resulted from rough treatment by Sean's slightly older sister.

Tobin conceded some of the lesser bruises could have come from the little girl, but she noted that a doctor testified the girl could not have come close to delivering the fatal blow to Sean, which the doctor compared to a fall from a multi-level building. "This was not the result of a 3-year-old pushing him down," she said.

Tobin said the abuse against Sean started at least several months prior to his death, but Sean's paternal grandmother, Elizabeth Herd, said after the verdict she believes it started long before that. She said she contacted state Department of Human Services officials when Sean was 4 months old after her son, Michael Sowards, told her Conklin was spanking Sean for crying. She said a staffer ignored her complaint.

Herd said after the verdict Thursday that she still blames DHS officials for failing to intervene after an estimated 10 to 12 complaints were made to them by various people.

"I'm not pleased with DHS, they dropped the ball," she said.

Tobin said during closings that Conklin before and after Sean's death tried to cover up "her dirty little secret" of abuse.

Testimony revealed Sean was nearly blind when he was brought it, likely caused by malnutrition. Sean was "feeling his way" around the house with his hands, Tobin said.

"If your 2-year-old child is feeling his way around the house, anyone would take him to the hospital or call an ambulance," she said. "The reason she didn't was she didn't want anyone to know her dirty little secret. Sean was targeted, Sean was abused, Sean was tortured."

Conklin's worry of police involvement also kept her from getting him help June 11, Tobin said.

Michael Sowards, who was supported by several family members while attending the trial, acknowledged during his testimony that he should have

been more attentive to Sean's treatment.

"He acknowledged mistakes, they were big mistakes," Tobin said.

Sowards said after the verdict he is "happy" and "relieved" with the verdict.

"I just wanted justice for Sean," he said.

Sowards admitted he and Conklin were somewhat abusive to each other but denied on the stand he abused Sean. He currently faces a charge of second-degree child abuse for failing to be aware of, stop or report the abuse. His case is pending.

Sowards has voluntarily given up his parental rights to the couple's other two children, Angelique, who is 4, and Brianna, who was born to Conklin in July while she was an inmate at the Macomb County Jail.

The children are with foster parents, who attended the trial proceedings and may adopt them.

Defense attorney Ronald Goldstein argued during his closing argument that jurors could not convict Conklin for neglect. The jury had to convict her of first-degree child abuse in order to reach a felony-murder conviction, which carries a mandatory life-in-prison term without a chance for parole. The jury also could have found her guilty of second-degree murder.

"She is not being charged with neglect," he said. "If you find her guilty of neglect, you can't elevate it to first-degree child abuse."

Sowards and Conklin were poor and Sowards worked different jobs, Goldstein said. They could not afford health insurance to take the children to doctors, although they received Medicaid benefits for the children.

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April 25, 2008

Warren woman faces life in son's death

Morning update

Associated Press

WARREN, Mich. - A 27-year-old Warren woman has been found guilty of open murder and first-degree child abuse in the death of her 2-year-old son.

A Macomb County jury deliberated just over two hours Thursday before finding Crystal Tamara Conklin guilty.

A pregnant Conklin was at home with the boy when the child's father, Michael Sowards, came home from work on June 11 and found his son, Sean, unresponsive. He died two days later at a local hospital.

Investigators said the boy had a fractured femur, two missing toenails and bruises all over his body.

The Detroit News and Detroit Free Press report Conklin will be given life without parole at sentencing on May 21.

Sowards also has been charged with child abuse. His case is separate.



April 25, 2008

Testimony: Marshall 4-year-old's injuries severe

Expert tells court that doctors knew girl was going to die

Robert Warner
Special to the State Journal

BATTLE CREEK - Doctors at Bronson Methodist Hospital knew that Mackenzie Vandenhede was going to die of her brain injury as soon as they saw her, an expert testified Thursday.

"From a neurological standpoint, she was almost dead," said Dr. Glenn Libby, a pediatric intensivist testifying in the second day of the murder trial of Chadwick Damon.

Damon, 21, of Marshall is charged with open murder and first-degree child abuse in the July 17 death of his girlfriend's daughter, Mackenzie Vandenhede. The little girl died five days after she was found with severe head injuries.

Using the Glasgow Coma Scale, which assesses the severity of a brain injury with scores ranging from 3 to 15, Mackenzie was given a 4 when she arrived at Bronson, Libby said.

A person with a score of 3 is dead, he said.

Her brain was swelling from what appeared to be blunt-force trauma, Libby said, and that was putting so much pressure on the rest of the brain that it was herniating and dying.

Libby said doctors in the emergency room at Bronson, where Mackenzie was airlifted after first being taken to Marshall's Oaklawn Hospital on July 12, immediately were suspicious of bruises all over the girl's body.

"Based upon the history given of some simple falls, we knew that wasn't how this happened," Libby said.

"In your opinion, this was abuse?" asked Calhoun County Prosecutor John Hallacy.

"Yes," Libby replied. "There really wasn't any other explanation for this type of bruising."

"Most kids that die of falls are in cases where they fall three or four stories," Libby said. "There's virtually no record of deaths from falls of two or three feet."

Damon told Marshall police that Mackenzie had fallen out of bed that afternoon before he found her unresponsive on the floor.

Defense attorney Mark Webb asked Libby whether some of the bruising could have come from someone attempting cardiopulmonary resuscitation on Mackenzie.

Libby responded that the bruising was not typical of CPR attempts, and in response to a follow-up question from Hallacy, said the chest and pelvic bruises were too old to be tied to a CPR effort from the same day.

"It's fairly ridiculous to think they were caused by someone trying to do CPR," Libby said.

Rather, he said the injuries might have been caused by someone hitting her repeatedly or perhaps kicking her as she rolled around on the floor.

Earlier, the prosecution finished playing a videotape of an interrogation of Damon by Marshall police on the night that Mackenzie was injured.

Near the end of the tape, detective Sgt. Scott McDonald indicates there might be some evidence of sexual assault of the child.

"You never touched her like that?" McDonald asks on the videotape.

"No, I did not!" Damon shouts vehemently.

Doctors later ruled out the possibility that a sexual assault had taken place.

The trial continues today in the court of Calhoun Circuit Judge Stephen B. Miller.

Robert Warner of the Battle Creek Enquirer can be reached at 966-0674 or rwarners@battlecr.gannett.com.



Poker player who left kids in car faces charges

Friday, April 25, 2008

WYOMING -- A Grandville woman faces a misdemeanor charge of abuse and neglect after she allegedly left her children in the car while she played poker at a local bar. The 36-year-old woman's name is being withheld pending her arraignment Monday in Wyoming District Court, police Capt. Brad Schutter said. Police were called about 1 a.m. Wednesday on a report that three children were left alone in a car in the parking lot of Woody's Press Box, 5656 Clyde Park Ave. SW. The children, ages 5, 10 and 15, were sleeping when police arrived. Police contacted the children's father, who picked them up from the parking lot.

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Parents warned after boy confronted

Two men with handgun approach 13-year-old in Clawson, ask for money

By Elizabeth A. Katz
Daily Tribune Staff Writer

CLAWSON -- Police are warning children and parents to walk in groups once night falls and to use their cell phones in the case of an emergency.

The advice comes after an incident of attempted armed robbery earlier this week when two males approached a 13-year-old boy on Main Street with what appeared to be a handgun, asking for money. The incident happened around 9:15 p.m. Tuesday while the boy was walking with his bike northbound on Main Street near Baker.

Police describe the males as both 18 to 20 years old and black. The male who approached the boy was wearing an oversized T-shirt and jeans.

"Only one approached. The second stood back," said Detective Lt. Scott Sarvello.

The young boy told the men he didn't have any money, but offered them his bike. The suspects then fled and the boy returned home, with his bike, a few blocks away.

"As the two suspects were running away, the victim said he could hear them laughing," Sarvello said.

The boy's mother contacted police 20-25 minutes after the incident. Sarvello said police combed the area but couldn't locate the suspects.

"He (the victim) was pretty upset over it, obviously," Sarvello said.

The detective said that this is an isolated incident for Clawson and they've received no other calls of this nature. Anyone with information about the incident should call Clawson police at (248) 435-5000.

Sarvello cautioned parents and kids about being out after dark.

"Thirteen-year-olds shouldn't be out walking by themselves," he said. "He had a cell phone. He should have called 911. Everyone's got (a cell phone). You might as well use it."

Contact Elizabeth A. Katz at Elizabeth.katz@dailytribune.com or (248) 591-2521.

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No millage for Bosse Center – archive

Oceana's Herald-
Journal

Posted: 4-24-2008

No specific law could be found that would allow the André Bosse Centers to seek millage requests in Oceana and Mason counties.

Oceana County Prosecutor Terry Shaw told the Bosse Centers board April 17 that he could not find anything specific that would allow the respective counties to put a millage request on the August primary or November general ballots.

“In short, it’s pretty clear the county would not have the authority,” Shaw said.

The center provides sites — one in Mason and one in Oceana — and personnel to interview children who have been abused or neglected. In the past, those children had to be interviewed in police departments or emergency rooms.

According to Shaw, the Legislature has created laws that allow some non-profit agencies, such as senior centers and public transportation agencies, to requests millages, but there’s nothing on the books for child advocacy centers. He could not recall the rationale the Oceana County Board of Commissioners used when it place a millage request on the ballot for the [Oceana County](#)

[Historical and Genealogical Society](#) in 1992.

Bosse Center Executive Director Paul Anders said child advocacy centers in Illinois and Florida receive either millage money or fines from courts. Board members speculated whether it would be possible for a Michigan lawmaker to introduce legislation to make something like that happen here.

Board President Bill Burd said child advocacy centers in major cities generally do not have funding problems because they are supported with endowments and other funding. Board member Steve Lessens said the André Bosse Center was the first rural child advocacy center in the United States.

Burd said the centers will continue their traditional fund raising efforts.

“This isn't the thing that is going to force us to close the doors,” Burd said.

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Article published Apr 25, 2008
Athens program helps single moms
Justin A. Hinkley
The Enquirer

ATHENS — Raising kids alone can make a rock of a woman, but when rocks fall, they fall hard.

A new program in Athens hopes to catch single mothers before they fall.

The faith-based nonprofit EXPAND last week started the Single Mom Support group, a free 20-week program that aims to build life skills, lasting friendships and reliable networks for moms going it alone.

"Single moms are the toughest people group we have in this country," Kim Tanner, EXPAND executive director, said. "But they have stresses on them that, if you're not a single mom, you just don't know about."

So far, seven mothers have signed up for the program that begins at 6 p.m. today at Athens Christian Center. Tanner said she'd hoped for 10 mothers, but wants to keep it small so more personal attention can be given to each woman.

Participating mothers will meet weekly for four-week blocks of programs about getting to know themselves, parenting skills, communication, anger management and financial counseling. Qualified guest speakers will be brought in to provide lessons.

Each week, child care is provided to give the moms a break. At the end of each four-week block, the moms will be treated to a fun night out, such as going to a ball game.

Aside from providing life skills, Tanner said the most important gain from the program is what she called a "toolbox" for the mothers. Mothers will network with other single mothers and other mentors who will be available for emergency child care, a shoulder to cry on or simply adult companionship that single mothers often don't have time to find.

Athens' Ronda Barber, 32, said the mentors and friendship are what she's looking forward to most.

Barber started out a single mother 13 years ago and raised her three daughters, now 13, 11 and 9, by herself until 2002, when she remarried. Things were wonderful until March 8 of this year, she said, when she had to leave her husband and moved from Centreville to Athens to live with her aunt. Her 9-year-old went to live with her father, but she cares for her 13-year-old and 11-year-old mostly alone.

Barber said she's having difficulty finding time to find a job while caring for her kids. Her kids keep her going, she said, but leave little time for herself.

"I ain't scared of my husband; I'm only scared of Him up there," she said, pointing heavenward. "He's the only one who can judge me. But I'm lonely, and that's the hardest thing. Sometimes you think about finding a place where nobody can find you, but you can't because you've got kids."

Barber hopes to gain "peace of mind" from the program, and to learn to trust others again.

"I'm hoping to make some friends," she said. "I can learn that it's OK to depend on other people to survive."

Tanner said EXPAND started planning the support group almost a year ago, interviewing single moms about what kind of services the program should provide. While the life skills are important, she said the support is key.

"We don't want to pick anybody apart," Tanner said. "We just want to help.

"And it doesn't take a ton of money to help somebody," she added. "It just takes a heart, a couple of arms and a couple of ears."

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Friday, April 25, 2008

John Doe No. 73 hunts for his birth parents

He was abandoned as an infant at a Detroit Crowley's store forty-five years ago.

Kim Kozlowski / The Detroit News

DETROIT -- He was just a few days old when someone put him in a shopping bag and abandoned him in a women's restroom at a Crowley's department store nearly half a century ago.

After someone discovered the newborn, he was taken to Detroit Receiving Hospital and called John Doe No. 73. For two consecutive days, photos of the infant appeared in The Detroit News, with police officer Frances M. Clinepleading for his parents to reclaim the baby.

"There are no problems which can't be solved," Cline said in the Feb. 15, 1963, edition. "It appears (this) was the act of a confused woman who panicked in the face of what seemed insurmountable problems."

No one claimed the infant. He was alone in the world.

Forty-five years later, John Doe No. 73 has identified himself as Richard Lane, a happily married father of two and owner of a successful public relations company in Mainz, Germany. He is now making a plea for his birth parents to come forward.

"I would simply like to be able to understand what forced someone to leave me and my life completely up to chance," said Lane, who grew up in Southgate.

Lane's quest to find his birth parents comes as Michigan lawmakers are pushing to open records to upwards of 20,000 adults who were adopted between 1945 and 1980. These people cannot get copies of their original birth certificates, but a pending bill in the Michigan House seeks to change that.

Lane, 45, has pondered since he was 18 and learned that he was abandoned: Who are his parents? Where are they now? Why does his 20-year-old son, David, have red hair?

He said he never wondered about his birth parents while growing up because his adoptive parents, Charles and Margaret Lane, gave him a family life that felt completely normal. But that changed when he found out he was abandoned.

"It was an extremely lonely feeling," Lane said.

He decided to try to find his birth parents because his adoptive parents are now deceased and he wants his birth parents to know that they taught him an important lesson that shaped his life and the person he's become.

"The first lesson they taught me was to learn to embrace difficult challenges," said Lane. "Now, my return gift is perhaps the message that their decision did not lead to the disaster they may have spent the last 45 years thinking about. I'm fine, and I hope they are, too."

Adoption rules changed

Lane only recently learned he doesn't have an original birth certificate because he was abandoned, so the state bill, if passed, wouldn't help him.

Even so, those who could identify their birth parents if the law was different say they share a kinship with Lane.

"There's a yearning in the heart, in the soul, in your being to know from where you came," said Wixom resident Dave Weaver, who was adopted as a child. He found his mother's identity, but she was already deceased. "It feels like there is a piece inside of me, inside the soul, inside the heart, that is missing. I wanted to fill it. And this is how you fill it: You search to find answers."

Nearly a decade before Lane was born, his adoptive parents started the process of adopting a child through Lutheran Children's Friend Society, now known as Lutheran Child and Family Services of Michigan.

At the time, the Lanes did not qualify for adoption because Margaret had already borne a son, and the agency only worked with infertile couples. But six months after her son's birth, Marge Lane had a hysterectomy and was no longer able to have children.

It was 1954, and the waiting list of people wanting to adopt a child was long -- a sharp contrast to today, when 4,200 Michigan foster children are waiting to be adopted and every year 450 children enter adulthood in the state without ever being adopted.

Lutheran Children Friend's Society changed its policy in 1962 and allowed couples such as the Lanes to adopt children. The Lanes applied again and were approved as adoptive parents in January 1963.

A month later, John Doe No. 73 was abandoned. Detroit was bidding for the 1965 Olympic Games, British surgeons completed the world's first kidney transplant and unwed teenage girls who got pregnant were sent away for nine months to give birth to "illegitimate" children.

"Today there's so much less stigma with having a baby without being married," said Barbara MacKenzie, regional director of the Lutheran Child and Family Service of Michigan.

MacKenzie suspects Lane's mother abandoned him because society scorned motherhood outside of marriage. She likely was young and scared, because those are usually the mothers who abandon infants today.

Finding parents not easy

Whoever abandoned Lane didn't have the option of dropping the baby off at a hospital, fire or police department within 72 hours of birth, as parents have today. Since Michigan passed its Safe Delivery law in 2001, 55 infants have been safely given to authorities, who turn the newborns over for adoption.

Indeed, it was a more difficult time for unmarried pregnant girls because they tried to keep it secret, said Effey Winkel, who at age 91 remembers Lane's abandonment because her late husband, Robert E. Winkel, was president of Crowley's department store.

It's possible Lane's birth parents may have their own families now, Winkel said, and they may not have told their spouses and children about what they did in February 1963. But Winkel hopes at least one of his

parents opens their arms to him.

"I would hope they would come forward so he knows them and feels like he has parents," said Winkel, who lives in Arizona.

Lane's longing to reunite with his birth parents is colliding with a world where people often connect more on an electronic level than human, and that may add to his urgency, said MacKenzie, of Lutheran Child and Family Service.

"We're cocooning with our computers and televisions," she said. "Because of that, the need to feel connected is stronger today."

Lane had happy childhood

Because Lane was abandoned, a judge estimated his age and gave him a birthday of Feb. 6, 1963.

Soon after, the Lanes adopted him and renamed him Richard Lane.

He says his parents gave him a happy, healthy upbringing. He attended Christ the King Lutheran School in Southgate and graduated from Southgate High School.

"Our lives are probably much better off that we were adopted," said Michele Lane, Rick Lane's sister, who was adopted three years after him.

"I have no hard feelings against my birth mother as an adult. I thank her. I wouldn't be where I am today or had any of the opportunities if I hadn't been adopted."

Though she is not interested in finding her birth parents, she understands why her brother wants to find his.

Rick Lane says he wants his birth parents to come forward so he can share with them that he turned out all right, holds no grudges and is open to what happens afterward.

"We'll see what happens," Lane said. "Life is usually most exciting when you don't know where all the roads will be taking you."

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Article published Apr 25, 2008

EDITORIAL

Moratorium needed on new Medicaid rules

The Medicaid program is a \$352-billion-a-year behemoth in need of reforms to ensure greater efficiency and eliminate waste of taxpayer dollars.

But we're not sure that the new Medicaid rules advocated by the Bush administration will provide effective change or simply shift costs from the federal government to the state level - and threaten many important services at the same time.

So we think Congress is right to push for a one-year moratorium on putting the rules into effect. The U.S. House cast a veto-proof vote Wednesday in favor of a moratorium through March 2009. But the legislation's prospects in the Senate are far dimmer.

We hope both the Senate and President Bush listen to all 50 governors, who believe if the new rules are not delayed and refined, they could have a devastating impact on states and communities.

Just like most taxpayers, we want to see Medicaid dollars used appropriately, and we certainly don't oppose strong measures to hold states accountable for spending. But we don't want to see the federal government, in its haste for "reform," burden states with even more health care costs.

Reform needs to be well thought out. It is about more than just cutting federal dollars. It's important that changes take place which effectively eliminate waste and abuse in Medicaid, without negatively impacting the lives of America's most vulnerable citizens, such as people in nursing homes and children with special needs.

Delaying the new rules for one year will help to ensure that reforms are done right - for the benefit of both taxpayers and Medicaid recipients.

April 25, 2008

EDITORIAL

Hurdles to Insuring Children

The Bush administration is determined to frustrate state efforts to provide health insurance to middle-income children despite analyses judging its tactics as illegal and unenforceable. That intransigence makes it likely that an impasse that pits many states, including New York, against the federal government will have to be resolved by the next president and Congress.

Last August, the administration imposed new rules that would make it difficult, if not impossible, for many states to expand coverage under the State Children's Health Insurance Program, known as S-chip, to include middle-income children, not just low-income children as originally intended. The directive poked a thumb in the eye of Congress, which was debating whether to reduce the ranks of the uninsured by enlarging S-chip, which is financed jointly by the federal government and the states. And it undercut efforts in a score of states that had proposed or already begun middle-class coverage.

Now the nonpartisan Government Accountability Office and the Congressional Research Service have rendered opinions that the August directive was not a mere clarification of existing requirements, as the White House had contended, but a new rule that should have first been submitted to Congress for review.

The rule sets high hurdles that states must surmount before extending coverage to children from families with incomes above 250 percent of the federal poverty level, or about \$53,000 for a family of four.

States must prove that they already cover 95 percent of eligible children with family incomes below twice the poverty level (\$42,400) — a population that is notoriously hard to reach. They must also show that employer-sponsored insurance for low-income children has not declined more than two percentage points over the past five years, a goal that is particularly difficult at a time when employer-based insurance is steadily eroding.

Several states have filed lawsuits challenging the directive. Let us hope that the views from the G.A.O. and Congressional researchers carry the weight they deserve. The administration ought to rescind its indefensible rule and not waste time and money defending it in court. Everyone agrees that S-chip should focus on low-income children, but states should be able to raise income limits under reasonable — not draconian — ground rules.

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Find bipartisan health care cure

BY MARK SCHAUER AND RICK SHAFFER • APRIL 25, 2008

The health care crisis engulfing our state and country is not a Democratic or Republican problem. It's a problem for everyone, threatening our families, our companies and our economy. That is why we are joining together to support the national Divided We Fail campaign and encourage others to do so as well.

Divided We Fail is an effort by a number of organizations that don't normally see eye to eye to come together to convince legislators at all levels of government, and from all parties, to make health care and financial security their top priorities this year. The AARP, Service Employees International Union, National Federation of Independent Business, and Business Roundtable, among others, are calling on lawmakers and community leaders to step up and address the issues of health care access and affordability.

The skyrocketing cost of health care and prescription drugs not only puts basic and cost-saving preventive care out of reach for millions of Americans, it also drives up the cost of doing business for American companies. In fact, 60% of small business owners say rising health care costs amount to a "crisis." This competitive disadvantage for America's large manufacturers, mom-and-pop stores, and everyone in between costs jobs and does a disservice to employees caught in the middle.

The middle class is particularly squeezed by the dysfunctional current system. Forty-six million Americans are uninsured, and nearly 30% claim they are skipping important medical treatments, prescriptions or tests because of costs. This inevitably leads to people winding up in emergency

rooms for illnesses that could have been addressed earlier in a less costly way. Sadly, too many politicians seem to believe this sort of emergency room health care "plan" is a sufficient way of handling our health care needs.

So what can we do? First, we need to agree that there are no sacred cows -- everyone involved needs to be willing to compromise. Second, we must identify concrete ways of saving. The United States spends \$1.9 trillion a year on care. We need to find a way to use that money more efficiently, perhaps through better use of technology; standardized, transferable forms that also protect medical privacy; pooling limited resources; providing more options to consumers; and encouraging more proactive care.

Finally -- there is no way around it -- we must ensure access for all to eliminate the costly scenario of resorting to emergency rooms, which drives up costs for everybody and makes it harder for health care providers to serve a community adequately.

As we recognize Cover the Uninsured Week, April 27-May 3, it is time to refocus our efforts on working together for a comprehensive answer to our health care crisis. No one can deny that the status quo is not working, so let's agree that a new approach, a bipartisan approach, is long overdue. Divided We Fail is both our warning and our challenge.

MARK SCHAUER, D-Battle Creek, is the state Senate Democratic leader, SenMSchauer@senate.michigan.gov. **RICK SHAFFER**, R-Three Rivers, represents St. Joseph County and part of Cass County, rickshaffer@house.mi.gov. For more information on the health care plan, visit www.dividedwefail.org or covertheuninsured.org.

Newschannel 3 Investigates: Food Stamp Fraud

April 25, 2008 - 12:39AM

KALAMAZOO (Newschannel 3) - Many people in Michigan have come upon hard times, and depend on food stamps to feed their families.

But what about those who abuse the system? Newschannel 3 caught a few of those people in the act, taking advantage of the program made possible by your tax money.

In Kalamazoo County alone, the number of people using food stamps is up 33 percent from 2007. But while some pinch pennies and stretch every last dime to put food on the table, you might be surprised to see what we found going on inside a kalamazoo grocery store.

And if anyone knows the value of a dime, it would be Tawnya Raab. She's been using food stamps for almost a year now, in order to feed her son Nicholas.

"I'll actually plan out a whole menu: breakfast, lunch, and dinner for two whole weeks," she told Newschannel 3.

But Tawnya and her son are just two of a growing number needing food assistance in a struggling economy, joining 1.2 million others right here in Michigan, and last month alone, there were 31,000 in Kalamazoo.

Yet as the need grows, lurking in the background is a consistent problem, one which you may have even witnessed in the grocery store.

It's a plot to cheat the system, when food stamp users spend their stamps on box upon box of sale soda pop, but then dump out the soda, return the cans, and use the return to buy alcohol or other controlled substances. Grocery managers and security guards in Kalamazoo say they see it all the time.

So why don't the food stamp users just buy what they really want in the first place? Because the system comes with rules.

"You cannot buy alcohol and you cannot buy cigarettes," said Don Mussen with the Department of Human Services.

So those who are desperate have found another way - by cheating the system - and lighting up or getting drunk off your dollar.

"It happens every day, definitely," said a Hardings Grocery store security guard, who did not want to be identified.

So Newschannel 3 decided to see for ourselves - and we didn't have to wait long - to see two men coming out of Hardings with boxes of Faygo pop placed into their cart. First, one man buys the loot and heads outside the store. Second, he and his partner dump out can after can of soda, just around the corner from the store. Finally, the second man takes a trash bag out from his backpack, piles in the empty cans, and heads back inside to redeem the deposit.

"And what does he buy with his new found cash? Cigarettes, for him and his partner to enjoy right in front of the building," said the security guard.

Hearing about the waste of perfectly good soda is just about all Tawnya Raab can handle, because it's a waste of what she and her son consider a rare, extra treat.

"It just burns me up inside," she said.

Newschannel 3 caught up with Raymond Taetsch, who works for the Office of the Inspector General in Lansing, and asked him about the legality of what a growing number of food stamp users are doing. He says that over the last fiscal year, his office investigated 5,800 food assistance fraud cases, but none were for what Newschannel 3 caught on camera.

"It's unfortunate, but it's not illegal at this time," said Taetsch.

And that shocks Raab, who doesn't understand how the system could ignore such a large loophole.

"What do you mean its not illegal?" she said. "It's still fraud use of food stamps isn't it? Doesn't it qualify? Wow."

While many feel that something needs to be done to control what people purchase because of those who are

manipulating the system, food stamps are a federal program, and federally, there are no laws against it, so state investigators' hands are tied.

"I'm sad that that's happening. As a taxpayer I'm concerned about that too," said Taetsch. "There's nothing we can do from a criminal standpoint."

"Right now lawmakers in Washington are considering making the practice illegal. It's part of the Farm Bill, where the Senate version would disqualify food stamp users who destroy food for cash. A decision is not expected on that for a few weeks.

Gov. Granholm is also considering legislation that would change the way food stamps are distributed in Michigan. Recipients would get the same amount of money, but in two payments per month instead of all at once. Those bills are currently on the Governor's desk.

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Need for aid growing

More residents are using food assistance

By Laura Mead

POSTED: April 24, 2008

ESCANABA — The number of people who need the aid of food assistance programs is increasing locally, as well as statewide, due to rising food and fuel costs.

Delta County Department of Human Services Director Russell Sexton said the caseload for people needing assistance has increased from 4,777 recipients to 5,133, since last year.

"The people we're dealing with not only have higher gas prices, they have higher food prices and home heating prices," he said. "Their incomes are so limited that there's no way they can make it."

Sexton said people in the community are having to make survival-type decisions on whether to buy food or heat their home, and the department's emergency relief cases have "skyrocketed."

Community resource coordinator for Alger-Schoolcraft Counties DHS, John Sherman-Jones, said food pantries are asking for donations in the community but even donors are struggling.

Salvation Army Maj. Bill Cox, Escanaba, said recently there has been a greater amount of people using the assistance of the Salvation Army food pantry. "We're giving out more groceries than ever before," he said. "In a 12-month period we give out 60,000 pounds of food. We will exceed that this year." Cox said even with high food costs people have been generous with food donations, but the food pantry inventory diminishes quickly. "We're giving away 30 boxes of food every week," he said. "At this point we really need our stocks replenished for summer and fall." Cox said the Salvation Army also has been having 60 or more people come to the soup kitchen each day — an increase from the 30 or 40 they previously had. Lori DeMars, co-manager of client office, St. Vincent de Paul, said her organization gets busiest towards the end of the month when food assistance benefits run out. She said another problem has been that people can't purchase toiletries or toilet paper with Bridge Cards (debit cards issued by the state for the needy to purchase food) — a problem for many. "We could use more donations of stuff like that," said Demars. "Those are necessities." Food assistance has become such an

Article Photos



Salvation Army volunteers help stock the food pantry in Escanaba. Salvation Army Maj. Bill Cox said local donors have been generous, but the food supply goes fast. (Daily Press photo by Laura Mead)

Fact Box

At a glance

- **Commodity Supplemental Food Program:** A monthly food package valued between \$45 and \$50 to low-income seniors, age 60 and over. Others besides seniors may also be eligible for the benefit.
- **Emergency Food Assistance Program:** A food package to seniors and non-seniors on a quarterly basis.
- **To register for the program,** contact your local senior center, except in Menominee and Manistique, where you may contact the Neighborhood Service Center offices (863-3042 in Menominee and 341-2452 in Manistique).

issue in Michigan, legislation was proposed which would split the once a month dollar amount appropriated on the Bridge Card into two separate amounts. The proposal recently passed the House and is headed to Gov. Jennifer Granholm, who is expected to sign it. Delta County DHS, along with DHS offices statewide, have conducted surveys to determine which delivery program food assistance clients prefer. Sexton said the result of their survey was close to 98 percent of clients were opposed to the change. Sexton said the change could have a negative impact on Bridge Card users in the area. "In our rural area, what happens is some people live out (in rural areas)," said Sexton. "They'll have to come in twice a month." People who receive FAP in Michigan, use electronic bridge cards rather than food stamps to pay for food. Sexton said the amount provided on a card depends on income as well as on the number of family members. Sexton said he does not think the government has raised food assistance benefits to match costs.

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Curves donates food to local pantries

Thu, Apr 24, 2008

Curves of Spring Lake recently donated 1,100 pounds of food to the Spring Lake Wesleyan Church food pantry. The food came from a joint food drive at the Spring Lake and Grand Haven Curves locations. Curves also donated 900 pounds of food to Love INC.

"We have a chance to help so many people at a time when the food banks are lowest, while we assist more women in reaching their fitness and weight loss goals. It's a win-win situation for everyone and we're very proud to participate," said Sandy Parker, manager of Curves in Spring Lake

Spring Lake Wesleyan's food pantry is open every Monday and serves up to 50 families a month. "Words can not express how thankful we are for receiving this donation," said Kristen Manglos, Spring Lake Wesleyan's Community Service Mobilizer and Food Pantry coordinator.

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April 25, 2008

Cutoffs and Pleas for Aid Rise With Heat Costs

By ERIK ECKHOLM

After struggling with soaring heating costs through the winter, millions of Americans are behind on electric and gas bills, and a record number of families could face energy shut-offs over the next two months, according to state energy officials and utilities around the country.

The escalating costs of heating oil, propane and kerosene, most commonly used in the Northeast, have posed the greatest burdens, officials say, but natural gas and electricity prices have also climbed at a time when low-end incomes are stagnant and prices have also jumped for food and gasoline.

In New Hampshire, applicants for fuel subsidies under the federal Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program received an average of \$600 in a one-time grant and up to \$975 for the extremely poor who rely on heating oil or propane, the costliest fuels. But those grants, which in recent years have covered 60 percent of heating costs, covered only about 35 percent of those costs this winter, said Celeste Lovett, director of the state's energy aid program. The state will have given aid to about 34,500 people by the end of April, Ms. Lovett said, a 5 percent increase over last year and the highest number ever.

The most immediate challenge is to help the high number of consumers who are far behind in electric and gas payments, said Mark Wolfe, director of the National Energy Assistance Directors' Association, which represents state aid officials in Washington.

"Based on discussions with major utility companies around the country, we will see record numbers of families facing shut-offs," Mr. Wolfe said.

Rhode Island officials, for example, expect shut-offs in 2008 to surpass the record of 30,000 set in 2007.

In Pennsylvania, applications for "crisis grants" for those whose oil tanks are empty or who face an imminent utilities cutoff totaled about 133,000 in each of the last two years but have already reached 166,000 this year, said Linda Blanchette, deputy secretary of income maintenance.

And in New York, the number of households that received aid increased by 5 percent in the last year, to 895,000.

Under the federal aid program, at least 5.8 million households will have received grants to help with heating bills in this fiscal year, ending Sept. 30, which is an increase of 3.7 percent from last year, according to figures to be issued Friday by the Energy Assistance Directors' Association.

This is the highest number in 16 years, Mr. Wolfe said. And the numbers would have been higher if some states had not been forced to reduce the number of aid recipients by increasing grants or tightening eligibility requirements — in effect choosing to provide more aid to fewer people.

Christopher Powden, a jewelry repairer in Goffstown, N.H., with a family of five, managed to pay his electric bills but fell behind on heating oil. “It was a long winter and the cost of oil was exorbitant, and when you add in the cost of electricity it’s impossible to keep up,” Mr. Powden said. Refilling his oil tank this winter cost nearly \$3,000, he said, but his grant from the aid program was only \$365 and he owes the oil company \$535, plus interest.

Mr. Powden needs the tank refilled this spring because the same furnace provides hot water. But the company will not make another delivery until he pays off the arrears.

The federal assistance program, known as Liheap, was started in 1980, to help families cope with sharply rising oil prices and energy deregulation, and it has become a routine part of the safety net. Unlike food stamps, which the government must automatically provide to eligible applicants, the program relies on annual Congressional appropriations that have not risen as much as the cost of energy.

Many states are calling on Congress to quickly add a \$1 billion supplement to the federal aid program, which has provided \$2.6 billion to low-income families in the current fiscal year.

Without extra aid, people who still owe large sums to oil vendors will not be able to get deliveries next fall, Ms. Lovett said, and many who did not pay electric and gas bills during New Hampshire’s winter moratorium on shut-offs may soon lose those services.

At one of the agencies that administers energy aid, Southern New Hampshire Services in Manchester, which covers Hillsborough County, there were 247 new applications for financial aid just last week and most of these were people behind on payments and facing shut-offs, said Louise Bergeron, energy director of the nonprofit agency.

One aid recipient, Rachel Trumphour, who lives with her two children in Nashua, N.H., heats with gas and electricity and started falling behind last year when she was injured and could not work. She now has a part-time job but cutoffs of energy loom. Last week, her electricity was briefly halted until the agency paid \$150 and helped her work out a payment plan of about \$190 a month.

When Ms. Trumphour received a shut-off notice from the gas company, the agency stepped forward with a \$625 grant to start paying her debt. But she must make another monthly catch-up payment, of about \$190. “I don’t know how I’m going to make these payments and also pay the rent,” Ms. Trumphour said.

Federal energy assistance, Ms. Lovett said, is “vital to the low-income population, our poorest residents including seniors on fixed incomes and the working poor.”

Under the federal program, states are given money based on average temperatures, degree of reliance on the

costliest fuels and numbers of poor people. Each state sets its own rules for distributing the money. In many states, aid is provided to applicants whose households make up to 150 percent of the official poverty line, or \$30,326 for a family of four, though the highest benefits go to the poorest families.

Nearly all states bar utilities from cutting electrical and gas services during winter months. Some families, like Ms. Trumphour's, put off paying electric and gas bills, then enter the spring owing large sums to utilities, leaving them at risk.

In Michigan, "we have just come to the end of the protection period," said Donald Mussen, director of income support programs for the state. "People are getting pretty high bills this month, and I suspect there will be quite a few shut-offs in May."

For oil users in Pennsylvania, mainly in rural areas, the crisis grants had to be increased to \$500 from \$300 this year, Ms. Blanchette said, because the suppliers, facing higher gasoline prices themselves, would not make deliveries of less than \$500.

"We expect that minimum will be a lot more than \$500 next year," Ms. Blanchette said.

Taking a different tack, Maryland this year reduced the number of aid recipients, to 91,000 from 100,000, in order to provide extra money to those reliant on heating oil, giving as much as \$1,190 to the poorest. The program has a waiting list of more than 10,000 eligible families, said Ralph Marcus, the state director.

"I think that next year, unless there is a major infusion of funds for Liheap, it's going to be tougher," Mr. Marcus said.

The choice between benefit levels and number of people aided is a wrenching one, he said.

"Next year we're going to have to take a hard look at that," Mr. Marcus said. "We may need to reduce benefits because we want to help as many people as possible."

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THE ANN ARBOR NEWS

Students to participate in homeless event

Observance at Howell's Freshman Campus in 3rd year

Friday, April 25, 2008

BY TOM TOLEN

The Livingston Community News

Howell Public Schools students are to get a chance this weekend to experience what homeless families do in the third annual "A Call for Action - Stop Homelessness" observance at the High School Freshman Campus. Students in grades 9 through 11 are participating to raise awareness about the challenges associated with being homeless.

"There are 95 homeless families in Livingston County on any given day," said teacher coordinator Cindy Perlman.

More than 100 students are participating, compared to 40 last year. Students have purchased T-shirts that say, "We're staying in boxes so others won't have to," and wrist bands that say "End homelessness."

Perlman said each student will get one large cardboard box, two peanut-butter sandwiches and a bottle of water and will bring one sleeping bag and one blanket; no pillows or electronic devices allowed. Students will stay outdoors for 24 hours, starting at 2:30 p.m. Friday. Leftover cardboard boxes will then be recycled, Perlman said.

Students also are collecting nonperishable food for the Gleaners Community Food Bank of Livingston County. That, plus the fundraising drive, have resulted in 500 pounds of food and nearly \$3,000 in cash collected so far, Perlman says.

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April 24, 2008

UNEMPLOYMENT DECLINES IN MOST STATE LABOR MARKETS

Seasonally unadjusted unemployment rates dropped slightly in 12 of the state's 17 large labor markets from February to March, the Department of Labor and Economic Growth said Thursday.

The jobless rate reductions in the 12 regions ranged from .1 percentage point in Monroe to .7 percentage point in Northeast Lower Michigan, though the average decline was .4 percentage point in the unemployment rate.

But unemployment increased over the month in the Flint (1.3 percentage points), Detroit-Warren-Livonia (.4 percentage point), Saginaw-Saginaw Township North (.4 percentage point), and Bay City (.1 percentage point) metropolitan areas. The regions were all affected by strike-related layoffs, DLEG said.

The jobless rate for the Ann Arbor Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA) was unaltered in March.

In March the state experienced total employment and labor force levels edge upward in the bulk of those areas.

"Although many areas in Michigan reported seasonal jobless rate declines, the initial impact of a major auto-related labor dispute pushed up unemployment in a portion of the state," said Rick Waclawek, director of the Bureau of Labor Market Information & Strategic Initiatives. "Jobless rate increases in the Detroit and Flint metro areas were primarily due to strike-related layoffs."

Over the year, 16 of the major labor markets experienced an increase in jobless rates, ranging from .1 to 2 percentage points. DLEG noted above average over the year rate increases occurred in Flint, Saginaw-Saginaw Township North, Monroe, and Detroit-Warren-Livonia metropolitan areas. Battle Creek experienced the only rate decline, albeit small, of .2 percentage point.

Between February and March, overall employment was higher seasonally in 14 regions with the average increase of .6 percent. Regions experiencing a decrease in total employment were Flint and Detroit-Warren-Livonia.

For the year, overall employment was down in 15 regions, with the average decline of 1.5 percent. Niles-Benton Harbor experienced total employment increases and the Muskegon-Norton Shores region was unaltered.

For the month, workforce levels slightly increased in 13 metropolitan areas and went down a bit in three regions. For the year, workforce levels were down in 14 regions, with an average decline of 1.3 percent. Niles-Benton Harbor had the largest workforce increase, with Grand Rapids-Wyoming edging upward, but labor levels fell in Muskegon-Norton Shores.

Payroll jobs were basically unchanged for the month, increasing by just 1,000 to a total of 4.16 million.

Job loss in manufacturing positions totaling 13,000 were somewhat offset, DLEG said, by seasonal job gains in leisure and hospitality services (up 5,000) and retail trade (up 4,000). Other sectors experienced minor increases in March. The manufacturing job loss was experienced mostly in Flint and the Detroit-Warren-Livonia markets.

For the year, seasonally adjusted payroll jobs declined in the state by 72,000, or 1.7 percent. The largest over the year decreases occurred in Detroit-Warren-Livonia (down 45,000), Flint (down 8,000), Saginaw-Saginaw Township North (down 3,000), and Ann Arbor (down 3,000). Niles-Benton Harbor again experienced a sharp hike in payroll jobs and Muskegon-Norton Shores recorded a small gain.

Grand Rapids-Wyoming and Kalamazoo-Portage experienced relatively no change.

Manufacturing and construction jobs are down for the year in all major metropolitan areas, but health services jobs are up in nearly all areas.

For county data, DLEG said 68 of the 83 counties reported seasonal jobless rate decreases for the month, while 13 reported increases. Two county rates were unchanged in March. For the year, jobless rates are up in 63 counties, down in 25 and five were unchanged.

Washtenaw County had the lowest unemployment rate for March at 4.9 percent, while Mackinac County reported the highest rate at 22.2 percent.



United Way donation goal achieved

Friday, April 25, 2008

MUSKEGON -- It has been called by many names in Muskegon since it was founded in 1918: War Chest, Red Feather, Community Chest, United Appeal and, finally, the United Way of the Lakeshore. On Thursday night, more than 300 people attended the United Way of the Lakeshore's 90th annual meeting at the Muskegon Country Club to celebrate the past and present, as they learned the charity's 2007 campaign surpassed its \$2.7 million goal. This was a 3 percent increase from the 2006 campaign. Employees of more than 350 area companies contributed to the campaign which helps fund 28 member agencies and 50 programs in Muskegon, Newaygo and Oceana counties.

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